

THE YARD SALE

The bed Bubba Ferris slept on was made of foam rubber; whenever he rolled over, the side he left stood up and followed him to the other side. What finally woke him was not the bright summer sun that shone so brightly through a window across the room, but the cigarette smoke that drifted about and hovered above him. It interfered with his breath and caught in his throat to stifle him.

Bubba shifted about in the hope that he could find a pocket of clear air somewhere—in the canyon of an elbow and chest, beneath the pillow; there was not one. So reluctantly, he finally got up and sat on the side of the bed, careful not to open his eyes too suddenly; wanting terribly to postpone the pain that would certainly come once he ripped the lids of his matted eyes open to face the starkness of reality.

Overindulgence was too mild a word for what had transpired not just the night before, but that day and the night before that. Bubba Ferris considered asking Jesus Christ for a reprieve but did not, realizing that that good Man probably had grown tired of Bubba's all too frequent backslidings. So with eyes still closed he fumbled about the bed and then the floor for a cigarette of his own, vaguely remembering that in some other life he had left a pack somewhere.

He was on his knees crawling about when Boots Daly walked into the room in his underwear scratching his chest. "Bubba, where did you put the vodka?"

Bubba went on with his blind search, patting the floor and grunting.

"What are you doing?" asked Boots. "Lose something?"

No," said Bubba, "I just haven't found it yet. And don't holler."

Boots left the room and returned shortly holding a bottle by the neck. On a table beside the bed was an opened can of grapefruit juice into which he poured some vodka through one of the two V'd holes, shook it, took a drink, and gasped loudly. He had himself another drink before offering the can to Bubba who had finally faced the light, but still without a cigarette. "Get that away from me," said Bubba.

Boots found Bubba's cigarette on the table and dangled the pack before his face. Bubba sat and crossed his legs and search his abused brain for a way to light the cigarette that hung from his lips. Boots glanced around the room, went to a closet, and opened the door. "She didn't leave much," he said finally. "I didn't really believe she would do it, Bubba. And she took my boys—both of them." Bubba said nothing, but stared at the floor in gloom. Boots stood on tip-toes to survey the shelf above the bare clothes hangers. "She'll come back. I'll get her back. She just wants me to suffer first. Emmett! Emmett!"

"Humh?" came the gruff grumble from the next room.

"Get your skinny carcass up, Boy! Get your guitar and come in here and play us a song. Come play us a Hank Williams song; I feel like a Hank Williams song this morning. Bubba, go wake him up. He'll lie in bed all day if we don't get him up. Go wake him up, Bubba."

"Nope," said Bubba.

"That woman took everything," said Boots. He disappeared into the closet, then stepped out with a white garment on a hanger. "Wonder why she left this?" Bubba looked up. It was a negligee, a transparent gown of fine quality. "I know why," said Boots. "She wanted me to suffer, Bubba. She left it on purpose. I know that woman."

"Maybe she forgot it," said Bubba.

“Maybe she meant to.”

“You got a match?” asked Bubba.

“You people shut up in there!” drawled Emmett in his naturally hoarse voice.

“You know, Bubba,” said Boots. “I don’t think I know how to treat women.”

Bubba had given up on lighting his cigarette. Boots reached to the shelf in the closet and dragged off several paperback books that fell to the floor. Among them were various short story anthologies, a copy of *Lolita*, and some classics. “She once told me *Lolita* was the most disgusting thing she ever read. Emmett! Whoa, Emmett! I'm going to pour water on you if you don't get up. Go wake him up, Bubba.”

Bubba took a drink from the juice can and went to the toilet. A full-length mirror faced him from the commode, so he made an effort to admire his chest—still somewhat youthful enough he tried to convince himself; except for the pink belly that protruded more than enough for him to change the subject. He needed to get some sun, he told himself—that was all. And after deciding not to shave and promising himself to spend some time in the sun soon, he went to the kitchen.

Emmett McCurdy was sitting at the table ramming a spoon into a can of English peas. “That all you could find?” asked Bubba. Emmett only mumbled and shoved the spoon into his mouth. Bubba discovered several more cans in a cabinet and chose one of vegetable soup, opened it with a knife he found in a drawer, and leaned against the sink and ate too. Then he joined Emmett at the table. “She didn't leave him much.”

Emmett spoke with his mouth full, “Huh, that son-of-a-bitch deserved it. I'm surprised it lasted as long as it did. That man don't have a drop of business being married. If he would have stayed

home sometimes instead of... Hell, he ought to have better sense. If I had of had me a woman like that, I would.”

“What time did you all finally go to sleep?” asked Bubba.

Emmett shrugged his emaciated shoulders. Although he was only thirty-nine years old his body was showing the signs of abuse—a sunken chest, graying hair, and teeth that were going bad from neglect. “Don't know. It was late though—about daylight I expect. Boots wouldn't leave me alone, kept wanting me to play that damn ‘Baby’ song all night. Nearly strummed my fingers off.”

Emmett was showing Bubba his fingers when the heretofore unmentioned member of that unorthodox group walked into the kitchen—in his underwear too; but wrapped about his waist was a set of holsters for cap pistols, the plastic belt of which would not have reached all the way around him had he not extended it with a shoelace. Both the makeshift belt and his striped boxer hung beneath his huge pale stomach. Upon his head sat a child's red cowboy hat. There was no indication the men at the table that anything out of the ordinary had occurred; but their eyes did follow the rather absurd sight as Curtis Lee went about opening and shutting cabinets and mumbling the words to “Get Along Little Doggie.”

Boots soon afterwards joined them; he had put on trousers and brought with him the vodka and grapefruit juice, which he stood in the middle of the table after straddling a chair. The others all watched him while he stared blankly at his lap, his lips starting to quiver. “She took my boys—took my heart too. I gave her every damn thing she ever wanted.” Curtis Lee turned his back to the others and gazed out a window. “This house,” continued Boots, throwing up a hand, “I spent nearly a whole week helping her look for a house—couldn't afford it either. But I helped her buy it anyway. I tried to do right.” Curtis Lee breathed heavily. “I tried to entertain her too; the best I could.” Boots sighed. “And what do I get for it all? Huh, I ask you? A kick in the teeth, that's what, a kick in the goddamn front teeth. Whoa me, I' m too old for this.”

Nobody said anything while Emmett dabbled with his peas and Bubba crossed his leg and stared at his foot. "My, my," Curtis Lee finally said, prompting the three men at the table to look at one another and, as if on some cue, burst into laughter.

After another lull, in which each of them grew introspective, Emmett spoke. "What are you going to do now?"

"I don't know," said Boots, his head buried in his hands. "Anybody want to buy a house?"

"I don't," said Bubba.

"I don't," said Emmett.

"Me neither," Curtis Lee said, and then there was another stretch of silence.

"Then you want to buy a bed?"

Curtis Lee proceeded to hum his cowboy song as the others found their separate places to plant their eyes in order to stare without disturbing one another's thoughts. Bubba stared at the floor, Emmett at the juice can, and Boots at the ceiling. And at least a good minute passed before Bubba said, "We could have a yard sale." This prompted Boots and Bubba to look at one another, which in its turn promoted a burst of nearly hysterical laughter between them. Curtis Lee did not miss a note in his humming.

"No, now, hold on," said Emmett. "Why not?" Boots started to get up. "Hold on," said Emmett. "Listen." Boots was standing and about to walk away. "Just listen, now. You have a few things left, like a washing machine."

"It doesn't work," said Boots, stretching. But his complacency took somewhat of a turn.

"Anyway, she's coming back. I know that woman; she's just trying to... she'll be back. Anyway, where can she go? It wouldn't surprise me if by this very night she isn't standing in the doorway with her arms wide open. Love is a funny thing, men."

The others did not seem to share Boots' growing optimism. "And books," said Bubba. "There's enough books around here to start half a bookstore."

"Nobody reads books," said Emmett.

"How about the bed and the couch?" continued Bubba.

"I'm telling you, she's coming back. Just wait and see," said Boots.

"And the air conditioner," Bubba added. "You have a good air conditioner."

"You don't hear a thing," said Boots.

"Well then, what are we going to do if we don't have a yard sale?"

They all began to realize the magnitude of Bubba's remark, which brought on still another period of silence; one finally broken by Emmett. "Do you really think she's coming back?"

"Certainly," said Boots.

Emmett clapped his hands. "Then let's have a yard sale and surprise her!"

"Some surprise," said Boots.

No! Listen, let's sell everything and buy her a bed.”

Now this captured the other's attention, but not because of the wisdom of the idea; rather, because they were not certain what they had heard. Then Emmett made himself at least somewhat clearer. “Let’s sell what’s here and buy Boots and her a bed—a nice bed; one with one of those tent tops. A nice mahogany bed with a roof over it—a white roof with dangles all around it.”

“Dangles?” said Curtis Lee. “What are dangles?”

“And some pretty colored sheets,” said Bubba.

“Goddamn,” said Boots, “you would do that for me? I'm going to cry.”

“There's only one problem,” said Bubba, “If we sold everything in this place we would be lucky to buy a good set of sheets. Do you know what a bed costs?”

“No, no,” said Emmett, “a down payment, that's all we need.”

“You boys would do that for me?” said Boots.

“Shoot yes,” said Bubba. “Probably the only reason she left in the first place was because of that bed you and her have been sleeping on. I would leave too. That blame thing in there has walls.”

“I agree with Bubba,” said Emmett.

“Me too,” said Curtis Lee.

“Well, let’s get started,” said Bubba.

“No!” said Boots. “Not yet. Let’s take it slow. We have all day. Let's have a drink and sing a song first. Emmett, get your guitar.” They all made themselves drinks in various containers: a coffee cup, a juice can, a plastic glass, and Curtis Lee drank from a flower vase.

Emmett brought his guitar in and he and Boots made Curtis Lee stand over where the stove had been, to pretend he was an audience, while they stood beside the table. Bubba left the room to stroll about the house in order to see just what had been left. He went to the room that had belonged to Boots’ two boys, and from there he could hear the singing.

Emmett: “My girl she lives in a big brick house, her sistern does the same.”

Boots: “My girl she lives in Conecuh County jail, but it’s a brick house just the same...”

The room was empty except for broken crayons and tumbles of dust about the floor. The walls had been colored upon in young-child fashion. A grin rose across Bubba’s face.

“She’ll be coming round the mountain, charming Betsy, she'll be coming round the mountain, Cora Lee...”

Bubba had gotten out of a detoxification center in order to come when Boots had called. Nothing serious, he often took breaks from life and admitted himself to rest. And when Boots' wife announced not only her intention to leave, but her definite plan to do so (actually renting the U-haul truck), he tried everything under the sun to change her mind—everything short of making any changes in his ways. And when none of his smooth talking or eloquent pleas worked, he sneaked out of the house and went to a phone booth and called Emmett, who called Bubba, who called Curtis Lee. And since the next best thing to a good celebration was a good mourning, they came—from all over the state they came: Emmett, from his fish market; Curtis

Lee, from the Escambia County Jail where he was an assistant to the assistant jailer; and Bubba from the Red Level Center for Alcohol Prevention.

Emmett: “My girl she wears that silken underwear, her sistern does the same.”

Boots: “My girl she wears them old cotton drawers, but they come down just the same—yeah, they come down just the same.”

“Emmett,” said Bubba when he returned to the kitchen, “You make us a sign to go out in the front yard.”

“Hell, let's put an ad in the paper.”

“Jesus Christ, Emmett, the paper is already out for the day. Anyway, all we have to do is stick a sign on a post and put it in the yard. That's what we're having, a yard sale. People who go to these things just drive around neighborhoods and look—just drive around ‘til they find a sign. People go crazy over these things. And Saturday is the best day too. It is Saturday, isn't it?”

“All day,” said Curtis Lee.

“Well,” said Emmett, “Let’s get started; let’s straighten up this place. Curtis Lee, put on some clothes.”

“Everybody, put on some clothes,” said Boots. “You all have to remember, this is a respectable neighborhood—and I have my reputation to uphold.”

“He's right,” said Bubba, who poured himself more vodka and juice. “Boots, you start thinking about prices.”

"I'm going to the store to get some more vodka."

Emmett found a cardboard box in the pantry, one an air conditioner had come in, and cut one side out to make a sign. The sign he made with a crayon read:

Going Out Of Business
Everything Must Go
Wife Left And Took All The Children
Low Prices

When he showed it to Bubba and Curtis Lee they decided it was funny, but the liquor had not dulled their good senses that much; so Bubba wrote on another piece of cardboard simply, "Yard Sale" and drew a smiley face in one corner and took it out front along with two empty grapefruit juice cans he used to brace it between.

When Boots returned with a half-gallon of vodka and two cans of orange juice, Emmett was sitting on the floor in the front room going through a stack of paperbacks. "How much do you think we can sell them for?" he asked.

"Don't sell my Flannery O'Connor," said Boots as he began to pour vodka into a coffee cup.

"Here's a hardback," said Emmett, "What about hardbacks?"

"Oh!" said Boots, "Oh! Oh!" He took the book from Emmett. "I've been looking for that book. Men!" he shouted. "Come in here, men!" Bubba came quickly, then Curtis Lee lumbered in from the hallway. "I have to read this poem to you."

"No poems," said Bubba.

“It’s short,” said Boots.

“Do you have to, Boots? We need to get ready.”

“It won't take but a minute; please, Bubba. You have to hear this.”

Curtis Lee sat on the floor in obedience; Bubba reluctantly propped against the door facing. Boots stood near a window so he could see the words and began by having a drink and a drag off Emmett's cigarette, a common scenario whenever he read. Then he cleared his throat, began to sway and wave his arm that did not hold the book. He had chosen *The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock*, something the others had heard him read at least a half dozen times. But no one minded terribly; it gave them all a chance to smoke and have a drink, and they were a courteous bunch besides.

Boots had reached the part in the poem about, “I grow old, I grow old, I wear the bottoms of my trousers rolled,” when a knock came at the front door. “Damn,” said Boots. “That was fast.” He threw the book down and they all scurried about trying to decide what to do. And since Bubba was the only one besides Boots who had his clothes on, except for his shoes (and Boots had taken his shirt off) it fell to him to answer their first caller. “Emmett, get your clothes on,” whispered Boots. Curtis Lee still wore the holsters and hat. And if the man at the door, dressed in a powder blue suit, could have seen beyond the wall of the hall, he would have seen three rather comic creatures cuddled close to one another like mischievous rodents, giggling and mumbling to one another about the most appropriate course of action to take under the circumstances.

“Mr. Daly?” the gentleman at the door inquired.

“Jones,” said Bubba as he opened the screen door and greeted the man with a handshake.

“Come in. But let me warn you, we weren't expecting anybody so soon. But that doesn't matter,

look around anyway. If you see anything you like, let one of us know and we'll make you a price. Are you in the market for an air conditioner?"

The man smiled weakly. "I'm not here about your sale, Mr. Jones. I need to see a Mr. or Mrs. Daly."

"Oh," said Bubba. "Boots!"

Boots appeared buttoning his shirt. He shook the man's hand too. "Mr. Daly, I'm from Wilson's Appliances. Your wife purchased an air conditioner from us in April. I'm sure it must have been just an oversight, but we haven't received a payment since May. We've tried to reach you by phone for the past two months and we sent statements and the last time we called, which was last week, the phone had been disconnected. Now, if there is a financial problem..."

"Oh me," said Bubba scratching his head.

"Well," said Boots, "as a matter of fact you did catch me at a bad time. My wife just left me—took my boys."

"My goodness," said the man. "I'm sorry to hear that."

"But that's not your concern," said Boots. "You have a business to run, and I can understand that. But look at us," Boots put his hand to his forehead, "I could at least offer you a drink. Would you like a drink of vodka?"

The appliance man did not. He scratched his head and grinned at the floor. "Mr. Daly," he chuckled, excuse me for saying, but you wasn't planning on selling that air conditioner at your yard sale, were you?" Bubba moved to Boots' back.

“Oh, certainly not,” said Boots. “And I’m sorry you even considered it. Are you sure you don’t want a drink?”

The man smiled and nodded. “Mr. Daly, why don't I just take the air conditioner back, and that way...”

“Suit yourself,” said Boots, “but I can assure you it is safe here. And by the end of this day I have a feeling you are going to get a good payment. My boys will be coming back, and they need that air conditioner. This heat...”

The appliance man smiled once more then motioned toward a truck out by the street and another man got out and started up the walk. “If it's all the same to you,” said the appliance man.

Boots continued to talk about his ill fortune while the men proceeded to haul the air conditioner away. And as they started down the porch steps, Curtis Lee came out and yelled through the screen door. “What' s the matter, man, you don't like children? Huh, you don't like children?”

When they all reassembled back in the room with the opened-out sofa bed, they discussed the immorality of capitalists until they had exhausted the subject, which was not long. Then Boots said, “What this yard sale needs is entertainment. Play something, Emmett. Play 'Red Dress, Baby' .” Nearly an hour passed in which songs were sung, tales were told, and liquor was consumed amidst the haze of tobacco smoke. And as Curtis Lee described the scene, the entire room looked as if it was a site where an awful jeep wreck had occurred, flinging the occupants all about in various states of disarray.

And it was while Curtis Lee was telling the story of he had once gotten his testicles and penis caught in a barbed wire fence and had to explain to a nurse what had happened, that a second knock came from the door. The men looked at one another, all in more than minor states of

oblivion already, trying to agree as to who would answer the call. Curtis Lee peeped out the door and down the hall. "It looks like a church woman."

"Well go let her in, Curtis Lee."

The woman had already stepped inside and was peeping into the front room by the time Curtis Lee reached her. "Morning." He let her go about looking, and only followed, answering her questions the best he could; about the books, about the scarcity of items. "You want to buy a washing machine?" The woman moved down the hall and into the doorway of the room where the others were not in the least prepared for decent company. And it took her only one very brief glance at the half-naked man lying on the sofa bed with a flower vase on his thin chest, and another drinking from a large orange juice can, to convince her she had come to the wrong yard sale. And before Emmett could vacate the bed she was already halfway down the porch steps. They had lost their first customer.

"Goddamn, Emmett," said Bubba, "put on some clothes." Boots could not stop laughing.

"All right," said Bubba, "let's get serious. You people are disgusting."

"I agree," said Curtis Lee, to which they all laughed and had drinks and recounted the look they imagined must have been on that woman's face.

"Stop it, men," said Bubba, "We have to get serious." The laughter started again.

"I wish I had a hamburger," said Curtis Lee. They laughed at that too—all but Bubba, who said, "Hey!" He had to get their attention, and when he did he said, "What we need is some refreshments."

"I'm not going back to the store," said Boots.

“No,” said Bubba, “what I mean is to sell. Let's make hamburgers and sell them—and beer.”

The others looked at one another and decided they liked the idea. Soon they were making a list and fell to arguing as to whose turn it was to go to the store, which led to an odd-man-out by method of the one potato-two-potato-three-potato-four game. Boots lost.

While Boots was gone and Bubba was somewhere toward the back of the house, another woman came. Curtis Lee answered the doorbell, led her about, and eventually came to the room where Emmett was dozing upon the sofa bed. She did not immediately notice Emmett, but she did glimpse the old trunk that stood by the wall. “Oh, I like that,” she said. “How much is the trunk?”

Curtis Lee looked over toward Emmett and told her “thirty-five dollars,” with little consideration. The price pleased the woman, who took a checkbook from her purse and proceeded to write as Curtis Lee went to Emmett and tried to wake him.

“Could I get you to carry it out to the car for me?”

“I don't know,” said Curtis Lee. “I don't think so. He's heavy.”

“What?” asked the woman.

“Heavy,” said Curtis Lee. “I'll see if he'll walk.”

“What are you talking about? Is there something in it?”

“Nothing but vodka and orange juice.”

“Well I'm not interested in that," the woman said with a chuckle.

“Well, I can't do anything about that,” sighed Curtis Lee. “You'll have to take him as he is.”

“What on earth are you talking about?”

“The drunk,” said Curtis Lee.

“Oh my goodness,” the woman said when she finally caught the sight of Emmett; and quickly she turned away, stuffing her checkbook back into her purse on her way out.

Boots returned with the supplies: meat, buns, fixings, charcoal, lighter, and ice. They took the table from the kitchen out front, stood it in the yard and made another sign.

Homemade Hamburgers 75 (*cents mark*)

Ice Cold Beer

\$1.00 the Can

Bubba and Curtis Lee found some bricks and an old stove grate in the garage out back of the house and made a grill on the front walkway. Soon smoke was rising up and out toward the street. Bubba and Emmett brought the washing machine out to the porch and filled it with ice and beer while Curtis Lee turned the meat on the grill. The heat of mid-morning had already enveloped the neighborhood and along with alcohol, had begun to mix adversely, sapping the energy of the yard sellers, and one by one they meandered back into the house to cool themselves with cold beer; all but Curtis Lee who would not abandon his duties as cook. He was proud to have authority over the grill, and entertained himself with singing and watching the flames whenever the juices from the meat would ignite them. But the fire had never caught quite properly and it was about to go out by the time a man and his young daughter came up.

"Ummm!" said the man, "Looks mighty good. Do you suppose you could make us a couple of burgers there?" Curtis Lee grew nervous at the realization of actual customers and fumbled about with the buns as he prepared them with fixings. He would have been considered somewhat less than a master at his new trade, but he did finally manage to concoct two facsimiles of hamburgers. The man took them rather reluctantly, the way one might receive bad news. However, his grimace was not seen by Curtis Lee, who wiped the leavings on his trousers legs and snorted a breath of short-lived relief. "You wouldn't happen to have some napkins?" asked the man.

"No, I don't," said Curtis Lee. "Would a strip of toilet paper do?" And he had already started into the house as the man assured him that good gesture would not be appreciated.

"How much do we owe you?"

Curtis Lee, in all the confusion had forgotten the charge and after a moment's thought, said, "Not a thing. We got plenty." And as the man and his daughter walked away, the child was attempting to say something to her father about the food she hesitated to consume. But the father gave her a less than gentle nudge in the rear with his knee and prodded her on away with words which prompted her to look back toward the hamburger maker with contempt.

Others came as noon approached; a huge woman with a dingy child who made faces at Curtis Lee, who returned them with displays of his false front tooth; an automobile load of women who plundered the entire house and left in disappointment. "Jes' a mess ah drunks," one said on her way out; and a derelict who wandered up and talked Emmett into donating a cold beer to a worthy cause.

But the spirits of the sponsors were not dampened; for the liquor was still plentiful and the stories were improving, and the senses of well-being abounded. Boots read a short story while he and Bubba attempted a one-act play that petered out because Boots accused Bubba of

poor acting.

Three women stood at the door, and a young man and his wife and small child came up the walkway. Curtis Lee let the three women in and went outside to turn the meat once more. The women, all smartly dressed, moved slowly down the hallway glancing into rooms and whispering to one another. "What a lovely old house," one said. "Somebody with a little taste could do wonders with it. Look, Joy, at those baseboards."

"There's nothing here," whispered another. And it was just then that Boots stepped out from one of the rooms with a glass in his hand. "*Good* morning, Ladies." He bowed most gracefully. Then he tipped his glass and grinned toward the most attractive one, a slender woman who wore pastel pinks and greens.

"Oh the red rose is a falcon," he began.

"And the white rose is a dove..."

The woman looked at her companions in disbelief and they in turn shrugged their shoulders and frowned. Boots kept right on grinning and holding his glass before him. He spoke softly and deeply,

"The red rose speaks of passion,
And the white rose whispers of love..."

He had gotten their attention and his charm had started to show.

"Now, I'll give you a white rose,
With a drop of dew on its petal tip."

When he had finished, once again he bowed, at the waist. "Now, ladies, what can we do for you on such a fine summer's day?"

Outside, Curtis Lee was showing off the washing machine to the man with his family. About new, I think."

"Does it run?" asked the man.

"It's not plugged up," said Curtis Lee, having his difficulties standing straight; a bit of the swallow of beer he was consuming trickled down his chin. The child was tugging at her mother's dress and whining. "I think Melissa wants one of your hamburgers," the mother said.

Bubba had just darted out the door, "Coming right up, little lady. How about you, ma'am? Would you and the mister like one?" He had taken the child by the hand and was leading her down the steps. "Have you ever talked to the hamburger fairy?" he asked her. "Oh, yes, they come out at night mostly. But if you look carefully round azalea bushes..."

When the family had gone, Curtis Lee saddled up next to Bubba, "You stole my customers."

This was right before the woman school teacher came, just in time to dispel the lull that early afternoon and mild oblivion were about to bring. She was the only one who considered the books, and was accidentally discovered kneeling on the floor in the front room by Boots who had stepped into that room looking for a cigarette. "Whoa!" he said upon seeing her, "We have a customer, men! A reader of books."

The woman was thumbing through a book of short stories. "You have some interesting things here," she said. Boots introduced himself and they talked several minutes before he said, "Come meet my friends," and led her into the room with the sofa bed. He was most gracious in his introductions of the school teacher, and since she was somewhat attractive from the point of

mens' view, they all managed to barely conceal their intoxication for the moment; but only for the moment. "This," said Boots, guiding the woman toward Emmett who sat on the edge of the bed, is our troubadour. Say hello to Phyllis, Emmett, but don't be crude. He *can* be crude," Boots told her.

"I cannot," said Emmett.

"And this," said Boots, pointing to Bubba, "is a writer. He writes."

"One story," said Emmett. "He wrote one story about his retarded uncle that he keeps in the glove compartment of his car."

"He does not," said Curtis Lee.

"And this is Curtis Lee," said Boots. "He doesn't do anything."

"Bubba does not keep his uncle in his glove compartment," said Curtis Lee; which brought a good round of laughter.

All four men were vying for the woman's attention. Bubba even went to the bathroom to study his appearance. When he returned the talk was about Boot's wife having left him and how they came to have the yard sale. They were determined that the woman should stay and let them entertain her. "I can't believe you fellows," the woman assured them.

"Oh! Oh!" said Boots. "Let's sing her a song."

"That's very nice of you, but I have to go."

“Oh no,” pleaded Boots, “Stay awhile. Boots, quick, get your guitar. We can't let her leave, she reads books.”

They sang for her; stood her in an appropriate spot and all four of them stood across the room as a quartet and argued with one another which song from their terribly limited repertoire would best fit the occasion; this while Emmett tuned his guitar. “If you people don't start acting better, I'm not going to play,” he told them. They settled on “Baby, You Were Meant For Me,” in order to have an accompaniment, and the school teacher was delighted.

Later, they talked her into a drink of vodka and Bubba went to the kitchen and washed out a plastic glass for her. She stayed more than an hour while the men entertained her with song and poetry and stories about one another; she came to know a synopsis of each one's life history—exaggerated histories, slanted favorably or not so favorably.

But the lady had to leave, she regretted it, but she had to, so Boots asked one more request of her. “Would you mind very much if I laid my head in your lap before you go? It would mean so much to me. I don't have anybody.”

“You are serious, aren't you?” the woman asked.

“Oh yes, I am. If I could just gently rest my head on your lap.”

The woman had to think about it, but she did give her consent and sat on the side of the sofa bed as Boots knelt beside her and gently had his desire fulfilled. “Could you just pat my head a little?” And she did that too.

“Can I?” asked Emmett.

“May I, too?” asked Bubba.

"Can me, too?" asked Curtis Lee.

"I don't suppose you would..." said Boots.

"No," the woman assured them, "I'm sorry."

Emmett and Bubba went out for another bottle of vodka. Curtis Lee entertained himself with crayons and a coloring book he had found somewhere. Boots tried to read but the words kept running together and he never had his mind on them anyway. Later they played poker on the floor with spent cigarettes as legal tender, but the liquor and awful heat took much of the spirit away and Boots kept spilling his hand. Occasionally a customer would appear, only to slip away as inconspicuously as possible; and besides the hamburger the mother bought her child, nothing had been sold. The talk grew more incoherent; cigarettes were beginning to be held too delicately at the tips of fingers, and Emmett lost his guitar pick and would not play without it. Bubba brought his worn story about his retarded uncle in from his glove compartment and attempted to read it but nobody was interested, and he and Boots got into an argument about it containing too many superlatives and Bubba got his feelings hurt.

Sometimes late in the afternoon Curtis Lee wandered out to turn the hamburgers; the fire was out and the meat had turned only a light shade of gray. So he fed that batch, the second or third, to the shrubbery and started over once more. His rapidly fading fervor made him sluggish and he swayed and staggered as he poured more fuel on the coals and put a match to it. The coals burst into flame, singeing his eyebrows but accomplishing little else; for shortly thereafter the fire went out and the new batch of raw meat remained only warm from the heat of summer.

Several other people wandered up as the sun started to drop beyond the neighborhood—the derelict who had returned for another beer; a woman in search of a floor lamp with a light at the base; and a young couple that strolled by looking curiously at Curtis Lee and the table and grill

where the leavings of a yard sale remained. Meat at various stages of rawness was strewn about the walkway and into the shrubbery. A stray cat had come up and was overwhelmed by the feast before it. Beer cans lay about the ground and porch steps. A roll of toilet tissue had fallen off the table and rolled down the walkway, leaving a ribbon in its path. And the drip-drop of blood, melted ice, and rust fell from the edge of the porch after rolling from beneath the washing machine down a crevice in the board flooring. Still Curtis Lee would not abandon his duties as cook.

Inside the house, as dark came, the empty orange juice cans lay on their sides and Emmett McCurdy slept on the floor clutching the neck of his guitar to his chest. Boots, whose family was apparently not returning, sat among the paperbacks crying and talking to Bubba about his boys. Curtis Lee wandered in and joined them and was soon crying alongside Boots. Bubba left them and went out to sit in the porch swing, disgusted at the awful sounds from inside. Boots would whine and Curtis Lee would whine louder. Bubba was still not over what Boots had said about his story.

Crickets had begun to chant by the time Curtis Lee joined Bubba in the swing. They swung together in silence for a while before Curtis Lee spoke. "I bet you thought I was really crying in there." Bubba said nothing. "Well, I watn't. I was just trying to make him feel better."

Sometimes during the night, late, an automobile went by the house where the yard sale had been, under a drifting cloud of smoke. The charcoal had caught fire. Bubba lay curled up on the swing. Emmett had not moved from the floor beside the sofa. Curtis Lee had gone to Bubba's car and was asleep in the back seat. And Boots got off the floor in the front room and went outside and sat on the grass between two tracks made by a U-haul truck. It was a hot night and the dew on the ground was a comfort, so he laid his face on the grass and stretched out. In the distance, from the river, a tugboat horn sounded as he nestled closer to the ground. His chest hurt and his breathing was hoarse. She was not coming back, he knew that much. Where had he gone wrong? There would be no bed with a canopy (he had always known)—no raven hair on

no soft cotton pillow. Boots turned onto his back and stared up at the starlit sky. He just had to get her back; and his boys—he loved his boys. Who would there be to tell them about life if he was not there? He shook the thoughts from his mind. There was time; he had lots of time. He would work it out some day. He searched the sky for a pattern among the stars, and thought of the legs of the woman in pink and green; she had had fine legs—Boots knew legs. He rolled over and picked himself up from the ground and went to the house. Opening the screen door he shouted, "Emmett! Whoa, Emmett, get up, boy. Get your guitar. I feel like..."

END